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Migrations of the Imagination: Photographs by Michael Forsberg, Drawings, Sculptures and Quotations by Paul A. Johnsgard, and Additional Works of Art

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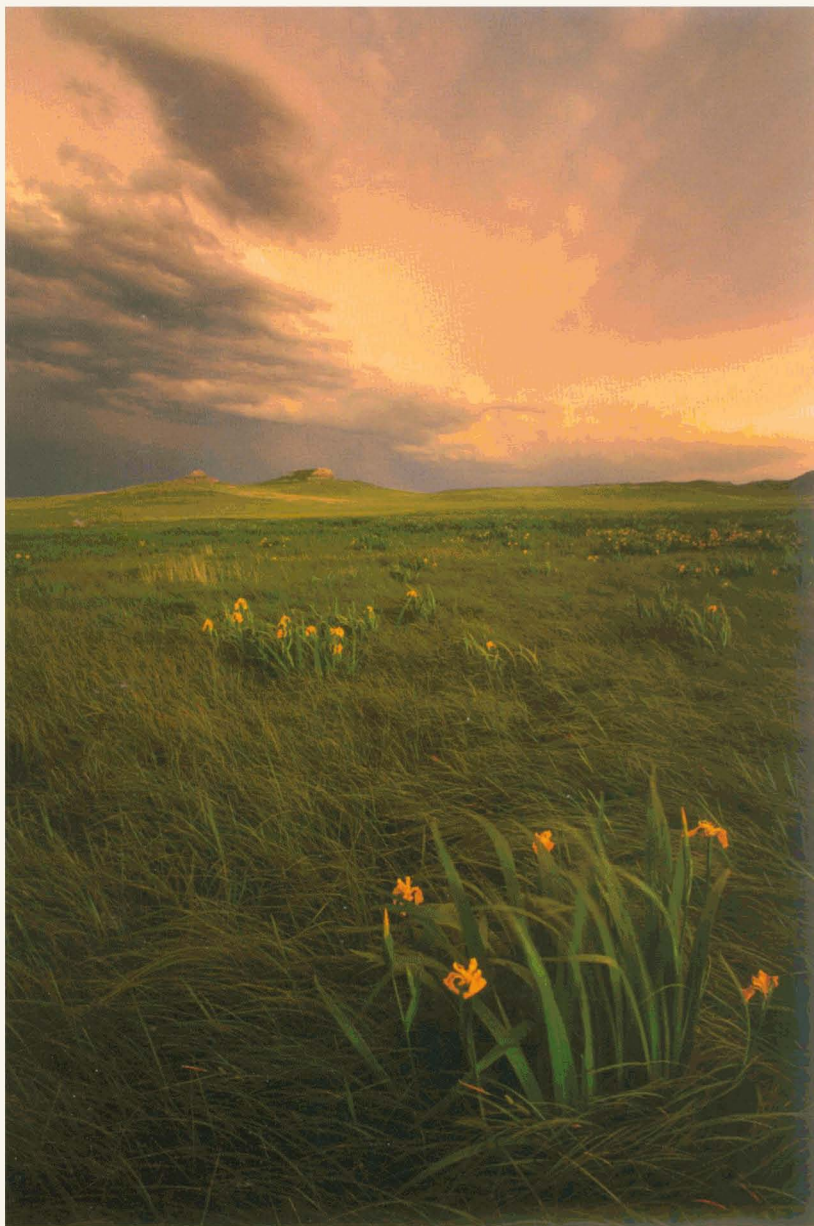
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Migrations *of the* Imagination



Photographs by
Michael
Forsberg
and
Drawings,
Sculptures,
and
Quotations by
Paul A.
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Additional
Works of Art

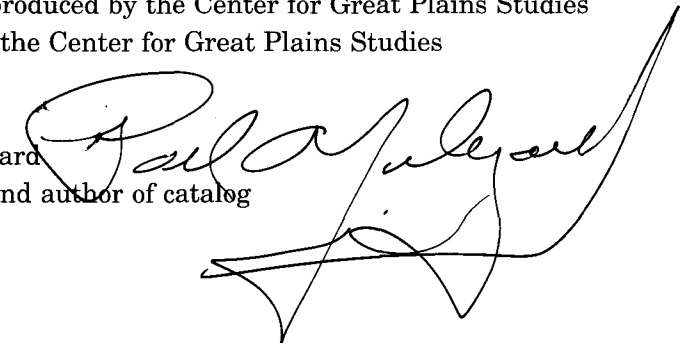
*M*migrations *of the I*magination

Photographs by Michael Forsberg,
Drawings, Sculptures and Quotations
by Paul A. Johnsgard, and
Additional Works of Art

March 1 – June 2, 2002

An exhibition produced by the Center for Great Plains Studies
and Friends of the Center for Great Plains Studies

Paul A. Johnsgard
guest curator and author of catalog

A large, stylized handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read "Paul A. Johnsgard". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with long, sweeping lines.

Great Plains Art Collection
1155 Q Street
University of Nebraska–Lincoln
Lincoln, NE 68588-0250

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and the Center for Great Plains Studies, University of Nebraska
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Cover: *Agate*. Agate Fossil Beds National Monument
Photograph © by Michael Forsberg/www.michaelforsberg.com

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I extend my sincere thanks to the Center for Great Plains Studies for proposing this exhibit, and especially to Sharon L. Gustafson, interim curator, who first suggested it, and Reece Summers, current curator of the Great Plains Art Collection, who saw it through to fruition. Thomas Mangelsen's splendid photo *Bald Eagle* was provided courtesy of Raptor Recovery Nebraska, Elmwood, and Images of Nature, Omaha. The Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery loaned Paul Johnsgard's *Trumpeter Swan* sculpture from their permanent collection. Three of Michael Forsberg's crane photos from the collection of the Platte River Whooping Crane Habitat Maintenance Trust, Wood River, were loaned through the courtesy of the trust's director, Paul J. Currier. Several other persons also loaned items from their private collections for use in the exhibit. These include Linda R. Brown, Jim and Judi Cook, Georg and Pam Joutras, and Dr. Gelerie and Erik Stenbakken. The Friends of the Great Plains Art Collection helped subsidize the publication of this exhibition catalog. Linda J. Ratcliffe provided its wonderful design.

INTRODUCTION

Migrations of the imagination are those images, sounds, smells, and tastes that transport one to another time and place, possibly as close as Nine-Mile Prairie near Lincoln, or perhaps as far away as the Canadian high arctic, and to times that may be decades or centuries removed from one's personal life and experiences. They hold us in their thrall, expanding our vision, and touching our lives in special ways. They help retrieve our own memories or perhaps stir us to make new ones that will live with us for a lifetime.

The migratory images here are those of nature, especially of nature on the move, such as flocks of migrating cranes and waterfowl along the Platte Valley in spring or the more placid movements of prairie grasses waving in an autumn wind. The photographs in the exhibit are those of Michael Forsberg. Michael is a native Nebraskan whose eye for composition and catching the critical moment are becoming legendary. His wonderful image on the cover of this catalog is especially appropriate to the migration theme, as it depicts not only native plants but also a recent European immigrant species, *Iris pseudacorus*. The ink drawings and wooden sculptures are my own, which were chosen to try to supplement the photographs. Some of the sculptures are decoylike creations that emulate the folk-art tradition in trying to catch the bare essence of a bird; others are more realistic depictions of living birds. There are also paintings by some of the best-known but now deceased nature artists of the past century, such as George Miksch Sutton, a Lincoln-born bird artist and ornithologist of national fame, and Wayne Willis, a Kansas wildlife artist of great talent. Sir Peter Scott, an internationally known British artist—environmentalist and one of the best painters of migratory waterfowl of the twentieth century, is also represented. Some contemporary Nebraska or regional artists such as Mark Marcuson of Lincoln and Thomas Mangelsen of Omaha, have been included. I hope that collectively this exhibit evokes both a sense of visual pleasure and a greater appreciation of the grandeur to be found in our living world. May these images transport you safely to places or scenes you have personally experienced, let you revisit some of your favorite Great Plains haunts, or even take you to more distant places so far known only in your imagination.

Michael Forsberg
Lincoln, Nebraska (b. 1966)

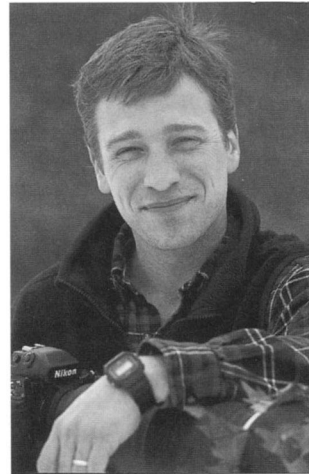
Nature photographer Michael Forsberg was born and raised in the Great Plains and grew up with a passion for the outdoors. After obtaining a degree from the University of Nebraska–Lincoln in geography, he began his photographic career at *NEBRASKAland*, the state's award-winning conservation magazine of the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission.

Since then his work has appeared in several national publications such as *Audubon*, *Natural History*, and *Outdoor Photographer*, and in books published by the National Geographic Society and Smithsonian Institution Press, among others.

In 2001 Mike won an Award of Excellence in the Science/Natural History category of the Fifty-eighth Annual Pictures of the Year competition for his image of a burrowing owl, titled *Balancing Act*. His image of Nine-Mile Prairie, *October in the Tallgrass*, was selected by the United States Postal Service for an international postage stamp, which was released on March 6, 2001, at the Great Plains Art Collection. This image is part of the permanent collection of the Great Plains Art Collection and is included in this exhibit.

Mike is recognized for his extraordinary photographic work on sandhill cranes; indeed, many revere his crane images as some of the best in the world. He is dedicated to working extensively in the Great Plains and is preparing a book built around his stunning images of sandhill cranes. Ultimately, he hopes his photographs capture the true spirit of the wide-open places of the Great Plains, build appreciation for its often misunderstood wildlife and landscapes, and inspire conservation and restoration efforts far into the future.

Mike lives in Lincoln, Nebraska, with his wife, Patty, daughters Elsa and Emme, and their husky, Grace.

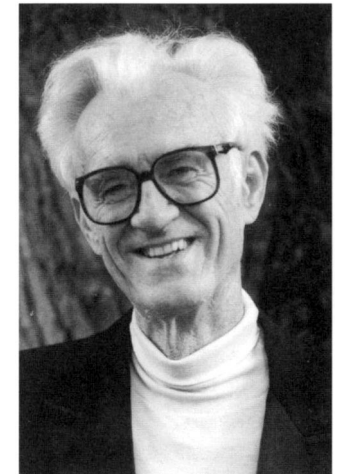


Paul A. Johnsgard
Lincoln, Nebraska (b. 1931)

Paul Austin Johnsgard, UNL Foundation Professor Emeritus of Biological Sciences (Ph.D., Cornell, 1959), is an authority on avian behavior and taxonomy, and is known especially for his application of waterfowl behavioral traits to evolutionary and taxonomic problems. Besides his waterfowl research, he has written world monographs on such avian groups, as cranes, grouse, quails, pheasants, waterfowl, shorebirds, trogons, bustards, pelicans, and cormorants, and on avian brood parasites and arena-displaying birds. He has also written widely on regional biology and natural history topics, including the natural history of the Grand Teton region of Wyoming, the biology of the Great Plains and the Nebraska Sandhills, the history and ecology of the Platte River, and the biodiversity of Nebraska. His three books on cranes have had worldwide distribution, including foreign translations, and in part have been responsible for publicizing the Platte Valley cranes as one of the world's great wildlife spectacles.

Professor Johnsgard has published forty-one books during his forty-year career at the University of Nebraska, from 1961 to 2001. Collectively, his books occupy almost five feet of bookshelf space and have been published by nine university or academic presses and five commercial presses. He has been recognized by the Wildlife Society, the National Audubon Society, and other organizations for his conservation work, and he has received the Loren Eiseley and Mari Sandoz Awards for his writing. The quotes used in this exhibit have mostly been selected from his previous titles, and the drawings are ones made for some of these same books. The sculptures and decorative decoys date mostly from the 1970s and 1980s and were done purely for personal pleasure. The *Trumpeter Swan* sculpture is on loan from the Sheldon Gallery's permanent collection.

He was the first University of Nebraska faculty member to win all three major faculty awards: the Distinguished Teaching Award, the Outstanding Research and Creative Activity Award, and a Regent's (Foundation) Professorship. He was listed by the *Lincoln Journal Star* (July 15, 1999) as one of "100 people who have helped build Nebraska—politically, economically, socially or physically, the past 100 years." He also was named by the *Omaha World-Herald* as one of the 100 outstanding Nebraskans of the twentieth century. Professor Johnsgard and his wife, Lois, live in Lincoln. They have four grown children and seven grandchildren.



Exhibition Checklist*

Michael Forsberg

(Lightjet color photographs, signed and numbered editions)

LANDSCAPES

Agate

Agate Fossil Beds National Monument, Nebraska, 1997
30" x 42"
Loaned by the artist

Solitude

Wind Cave National Park, South Dakota, 1999
30" x 42"
Great Plains Art Collection

The Way West

Chimney Rock, Morrill County, Nebraska, 2001
30" x 42"
Loaned by the artist

Sandhills Reflections

Grant County, Nebraska, 1998
30 "x 42"
Loaned by the artist

Badlands Twilight

Buffalo Gap National Grasslands, South Dakota, 1999
30" x 42"
Loaned by the artist

Whitman Road

Grant County, Nebraska, 2000
30" x 42"
Loaned by Georg and Pam Joutras, Lincoln

October in the Tallgrass

Nine-Mile Prairie, Lancaster County, Nebraska, 1994
45" x 65"
Great Plains Art Collection

SANDHILL CRANES

Return to the River

Sandhill cranes, Platte River Valley, Nebraska, 1996
30" x 42"
Loaned by Linda Brown, Lincoln

Hang Time

Sandhill cranes, Platte River Valley, Nebraska, 2001
30" x 42"
Loaned by the artist

**Measurements given for flat art are frame sizes*

Leaving the Roost

Sandhill cranes, Platte River Valley, Nebraska, 1997
30" x 42"
Loaned by the Platte River Whooping Crane Maintenance Trust

Bird's Eye View

Sandhill cranes, Platte River Valley, Nebraska, 1998
30" x 42"
Loaned by the artist

The Gift

Sandhill crane feather, Platte River Valley, Nebraska, 1998
22" x 28"
Loaned by the artist

Joy

Sandhill crane, Platte River Valley, Nebraska, 1998
36" x 43" (with a crane feather carved by Cliff Hollestelle inset in mat)
Loaned by the Platte River Whooping Crane Maintenance Trust

The Dance

Sandhill cranes, Platte River Valley, Nebraska, 1998
36" x 43" (with a crane feather carved by Cliff Hollestelle inset in mat)
Loaned by Jim and Judi Cook, Lincoln

The Chase

Sandhill cranes, Platte River Valley, Nebraska, 1998
36" x 43" (with a crane feather carved by Cliff Hollestelle inset in mat)
Loaned by Erik and Dr. Gelerie Stenbakken, Papillion

Council of Cranes

Sandhill cranes, Platte River Valley, Nebraska, 1998
45" x 65"
Loaned by the Platte River Whooping Crane Maintenance Trust

OTHER WILDLIFE

Balancing Act

Burrowing owl, Buffalo Gap National Grasslands, South Dakota, 2000
40" x 60"
Loaned by the artist

Autumn Haiku

Orange-crowned warbler, Custer State Park, South Dakota, 1999
22" x 28"
Loaned by the artist

Ghosts of the Prairie

Swift fox, Box Butte County, Nebraska, 2001
22" x 28"
Loaned by the artist

Paul A. Johnsgard

WOOD SCULPTURES

Trumpeter Swan

Wood, oil paint, 1971

30 1/2" x 12" x 9"

On loan from Nebraska Art Association Collection,
Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, Lincoln

Western Grebe with Chick

Wood, acrylic paint, 1982

12" x 10" x 6"

Loaned by the artist

Red-breasted Goose

Wood, acrylic paint, 1982

15 1/2" x 7" x 7"

Loaned by the artist

King Eider

Wood, acrylic paint, 1981

17" x 7 1/2" x 8"

Loaned by the artist

Hawaiian Goose

Wood, acrylic paint, 1982

20" x 10" x 8"

Loaned by the artist

Common Loon with Chick

Wood, acrylic paint, 1985

19" x 11" x 9"

Loaned by artist

Gyr Falcon

Wood, acrylic paint, 1984

24" x 14" x 16"

Loaned by the artist

Hawk Owl

Wood, acrylic paint, 1985

19" x 18" x 21"

Loaned by the artist

Horned Grebes

pair. Wood, acrylic paint, 1976

11" x 6" x 5 1/2" and 9" x 6" x 5 1/2"

Loaned by the artist

(carved for his parents' fiftieth wedding anniversary, June 25, 1976)

Ink Drawings and Prints

CRANES

Sandhill Crane

Walking adult. Ink drawing, with color pencil, c. 1981

20" x 28"

Drawn for *Cranes of the World*

Loaned by the artist

Sandhill Crane

Adult brooding chick. Ink drawing, with color pencil, 1980

14" x 18"

Drawn for *Those of the Gray Wind*

Loaned by the artist

Dancing Sandhill Cranes

Signed and numbered print of ink drawing, c. 1981

20" x 27"

Drawn for *Cranes of the World*

Loaned by Linda Brown, Lincoln

Whooping Crane

Preening adult. Ink drawing, with color pencil, c. 1981

20" x 28"

Drawn for *Cranes of the World*

Loaned by the artist

Whooping Cranes Landing

Signed print of ink drawing, 1995

16" x 21 1/2"

Drawn for *Crane Music*

Loaned by Linda Brown, Lincoln

Eurasian Cranes

In flight. Ink drawing, c. 1981

24" x 31"

Drawn for *Cranes of the World*

Loaned by the artist

OTHER BIRDS AND MAMMALS

Upland Sandpiper

Landing. Ink drawing, c. 1990

20" x 28"

Drawn for *This Fragile Land*

Loaned by the artist

Sanderlings

Pair in flight. Ink drawing, c. 1980

24" x 31"

Drawn for *Plovers, Sandpipers and Snipes of the World*

Loaned by the artist

Black-tailed Godwit

Adult in flight. Ink drawing, c. 1980

24" x 31"

Drawn for *Plovers, Sandpipers and Snipes of the World*

Loaned by the artist

Greater Prairie-Chicken

Males fighting. Ink and colored pencil drawing, 1981

20" x 24"

Drawn for *The Grouse of the World*

Great Plains Art Collection

Bobcat

Adult. Ink drawing, 2001

16" x 20"

Drawn for *The Nature of Nebraska*

Loaned by the artist

Bison

Male flehmen display. Ink drawing, 2001

19 1/2" x 23 1/2"

Drawn for *The Nature of Nebraska*

Loaned by the artist

Burrowing Owl

Adult and young. Signed and numbered print of ink drawing, 1987

15 1/2" x 21 1/2"

Drawn for North American Owls

Loaned by Linda Brown, Lincoln

Ruddy Duck

Adult male. Signed serigraph, c. 1978

17" x 22"

Drawn for *Waterfowl of North America*

Loaned by Linda Brown, Lincoln

Ruffed Grouse

Adult male. India Ink, c. 1974

13" x 15"

Drawn for *North American Game Birds of Upland and Shoreline*

Loaned by artist

M. Wayne Willis

Wichita, Kansas (1913-1991)

Canada Geese over Cheyenne Bottoms

Oil, c. 1970

29" x 40"

Private collection

George Miksch Sutton

Norman, Oklahoma (1898-1982)

Sandhill Cranes, West of Cambridge Bay, Victoria Island, NWT

Watercolor, 1962

25" x 31"

Private collection

Mark Marcuson

Lincoln, Nebraska (b. 1960)

Least, Whiskered and Parakeet Auklets

Pribilof Islands, Bering Sea. Watercolor, 1986

17" x 21"

Published in *Diving Birds of North America*, by Paul A. Johnsgard

Private collection

Sir Peter Scott

Great Britain (1909-1989)

Labrador Ducks

Watercolor, 1972

17" x 21"

Published in *Waterfowl of North America*, by Paul A. Johnsgard

Private collection

Thomas B. Mangelsen

Omaha, Nebraska, and Jackson, Wyoming

Bald Eagle

Alaska. Color print, 2000

30" x 40"

Loaned by Raptor Recovery Nebraska.

Quotations by Paul A. Johnsgard

Author's note: A few of the following quotes that have been recast as free verse have had minor punctuation or wording changes from the original.

ROAMING: PERSONAL MIGRATIONS

Sensual and Surreal

It is a rare, almost sensual, pleasure to be able to stroll
Among the almost cathedral-like trees of Fontenelle Forest
During the warbler "fallouts" of early May,
Or to gaze across nearly unbroken vistas of tallgrass prairies
Such as those of Nine-mile Prairie or Spring Creek Ranch in October,
When the bluestems turn coppery red, and the fall sky turns azure blue.

And, it is an almost surreal experience to share a prairie sunrise
Solely in the company of prairie grouse,
Whose archaic language is that of the Oligocene or even earlier,
And whose endless story has been repeated every spring,
Year after year, century after century,
Never tiring in its urgency or intensity.

Experiencing this event for the first time must be almost akin to
Initially landing on the moon, or discovering some new phenomenon—
There are no words within one's personal experience to describe it
adequately.

— *The Nature of Nebraska*

Skyward Voices

And so I turn my eyes toward the east and west each spring, making sure
that I am witness to at least one sunrise and sunset in the company of grassland
birds. At times it is a shared sunrise with greater prairie-chickens on a rounded
hilltop crowned by bluestem prairies. Often it is shared with sandhill cranes
gathering in Nebraska's Platte Valley, and occasionally with migrating wildfowl,
who also are stirred to move northward, following the annual northward sweep of
the sun. In some special places, and at such precious times, it is easy to imag-

ine that one is a part of a different world, where warfare and famine are far-
removed, and the combined noises of wind, uncounted wings and a chorus of
skyward voices are little if at all different from the sounds that were present an
ice age or two ago. I suspect that the migrating cranes of a pre-ice-age period
some ten million years ago would fully understand every nuance of the crane
conversation going on today along the Platte. Cranes have scarcely changed in
these millions of years, whereas the world around them now would be scarcely
recognizable to birds of that era.

— *Prairie Birds*

Ten Thousand Cranes

The sights and sounds of cranes roosting on the Platte are immeasurably
old, but are also forever new and variable. Early one recent March morning, as
night slowly gave rise to dawn on the Platte River, the planet Mars was high in
the sky, Venus was brilliant in the eastern sky, and the moon was approaching
fullness. Great horned owls sang occasional duets, and the cranes talked to one
another with increasing urgency. Then, just before sunrise, the cranes rose
majestically in flock after flock, along with even larger groups of Canada geese,
and headed toward feeding grounds south of the river. To one who has never
experienced the visual and aural components of such a scene, it is nearly
impossible to try to convey, but standing beside railroad tracks as a speeding
locomotive passes by may give some slight idea of the sound and implicit power
expressed in the takeoff of ten thousand cranes.

— *Earth, Water and Sky*

Snow Geese

Snow geese, like pasque flowers, have always been my personal symbol of
spring. North Dakota winters are so long and dreary that as a teen-ager I literally
began counting the days in March until the first snow geese arrived in the just-
melting marshes near my home town at the south end of the Red River Valley.
Hearing their wild, excited voices overhead was enough to make me forget
everything else, and plead with my father to let me borrow the family car long
enough to experience the arrival of the incoming flocks. Then, standing knee-
deep in the near-freezing water of glacial-age marshes, and hidden by head-high
phragmites I would exult in the sheer joy of the moment, imagining that I was
alone with uncountable wild geese, and headed with them for unknowable lands
still much farther to the north. It was another twenty years before I finally traveled
at last to the Canadian tundra, to see the birds on their nesting grounds, and
was able to feel that at least I had begun to understand some of their secrets.

— *The Nature of Nebraska*



Paul A. Johnsgard. *TRUMPETER SWAN*. 1971. Wood, oil paint. 30 1/2 x 12 x 9 in.
Courtesy of Nebraska Art Association Collection, Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, Lincoln.

Personal Gods and Epiphanies

This annual spring ritual of meeting the geese on their return from the south was more important to me than the opening day of the hunting season, the beginning of summer vacation, or even the arrival of Christmas. The spring return of the geese represented my epiphany, a manifestation of gods I could see, hear, and nearly touch as they streamed into the marsh a few feet above the tips of the cattails and phragmites. By evening I would be wet, cold, and exhausted from wading through icy waters and crawling through mud and snow. But during the drive home my ears would resound with the cries of the wild geese and, when I closed my eyes that night, I saw them still, their strong wings flashing in the sunlight, their immaculate bodies projected against the azure sky. They were my criterion of beauty, my definition of wildness, my vision of paradise. I had little idea of where they had come from and even less conception of where they were headed. I knew only that I must be there to see them, to become a vicarious part of something I couldn't begin to understand, but which to me represented the primordial energy of life.

— *Song of the North Wind*



George Miksch Sutton. *SANDHILL CRANES, WEST OF CAMBRIDGE BAY, VICTORIA ISLAND, NWT*. 1962. Watercolor. 25 x 31 in. Private collection.

Sixty Million Years of History

(Each spring) I drive down country roads far more familiar to me than are most back streets of Lincoln, noting new houses rather magically appearing around sandpit lakes that only a few years before supported least terns and piping plovers, and the remains of old, abandoned farmsteads that similarly have nearly disappeared since the previous spring. Century-old cottonwoods lie sprawled and broken in gigantic, chaotic heaps, where either old age or the need to clear more land for center-pivot irrigation has dictated their removal. At last I reach my destination: a stretch of privately owned meadows and river shoreline miles from the nearest public access. Grabbing my binoculars and camera, I head out to find the tallest grasses I can find near the river. Lying down, I am surrounded by last year's growth of Indiangrass and big bluestem, the Indiangrass now rich golden copper, and the bluestem with a reddish tinge that has always seemed to me to be the very hallmark of native prairie. It is now

nearly sundown. Song sparrows are singing occasionally from a willow thicket near the river, and newly arrived red-winged blackbirds sit rather aimlessly and silently about, perhaps wondering where the females are, while keeping a wary eye out for great horned owls in the deepening afternoon light. The cranes are now returning to the river, with great and endless waves of birds passing overhead, their jubilant calls carrying with them the authority of almost sixty million years of history, plus the excitement of the moment. As I lie there, drinking in the sights, sounds, odors and touch of prairie, I wonder how many others have known the magic of spending a spring evening alone with birds, alongside a prairie river, and if they have also had the urge to try burn it into memory, to be recalled at times and places far removed.

— *Prairie Birds*

The Great Plains

Few geographic regions of North America possess a greater capacity for the imagination to run free rein than the simple words “Great Plains.” Visions of bison covering the landscape from horizon to horizon, endless blue skies painted over limitless fields of grass waving hypnotically in the breeze, the smell of newly wetted black soil and fresh ozone in the air after a sky-shattering thunderstorm, and the bronzy color of bluestem and Indiangrass in late fall. There is also the confident feeling that one might hike in any direction for an entire day, without making detours, or ever losing sight of the place you have left or the one you are headed toward. Compasses are a needless luxury in the plains. Persons who have grown up in the mountains or forests might feel slightly exposed in the plains—where can you hide from rain, hail, lightning or tornadoes? The simple fact is, you can’t. I have watched tornado funnels dance across the landscape with the ominous force of an approaching army, tossing aside everything they encounter in their paths, and have crouched helplessly on the grass while being pelted with hailstones and driving rain. But these things pass quickly; a half-hour later the sun may be shining and the birds singing as if nothing at all had happened.

— *Great Wildlife of the Great Plains*

OBSERVING: MIGRATIONS OF THE NATURAL WORLD

Magic Attraction

We don't know what originally drew the cranes to the Platte,
But the unique present-day combination of a wide, sandy river,
Nearby wet meadows with a supply of invertebrate foods for a source of calcium,

And an almost unlimited amount of waste corn in nearby fields
For getting abundant carbohydrates that can be converted and stored as fat
Provide the magic attraction now.

Millions of snow geese, Canada geese and other geese join in on this feast,
As do several million ducks,
Making March in Nebraska a bird-watcher's paradise.
Its prospect alone is enough to warm the heart during the long days of winter,
And the sounds of cranes filling the sky when they finally do arrive
Is at least as thrilling as hearing a massed choir
Singing the triumphant chorus to Beethoven's Ninth Symphony.
— *The Nature of Nebraska*

The Crane Roost

Late March along the Platte is sheer magic. For more than a month sandhill cranes pour into the valley from Texas and New Mexico, their numbers topping out at nearly a half million. From then until about mid-April countless cranes make their daily flights out into cornfields and meadows to harvest whatever grain and invertebrates they can find, building up critical fat stores that are essential for their remaining spring migration and arctic breeding. Near sunset each evening the birds begin moving toward traditional roosting sites on sandy islands and barren sandbars. Flocks of a thousand or more cranes fly low over the river, their voices rising and falling in crescendos as they approach, pass overhead, and disappear again in the distance. As the sun sinks ever closer toward the horizon the birds become increasingly nervous, hoping to find a safe landing place before it is wholly dark. Finally, some individual brave crane touches down, to be followed moments later by another, then dozens, and finally hundreds. Eventually as many as 20,000 may occupy a single roost, stretched out along a mile or more of the river. After some initial jostling for position, and re-joining of any pairs or family members that may have been temporarily separated in the confusion of landing, darkness settles in on the crane roost.

— *Great Wildlife of the Great Plains*

The Northern Rim of the World

In the sun-warmed mid-April days along the Platte the cranes ascend in great slow-motion whirlwinds, their wings lifted by invisible thermals until they are almost out of sight, with only their excited calls wafting down to betray their excitement, as they head off toward unknowable destinations somewhere along the northern rim of the world. Soon after leaving the Platte Valley the great flocks begin to split up, some heading for Hudson Bay shorelines and islands, others



Michael Forsberg. *BALANCING ACT*. Burrowing Owl, Buffalo Gap National Grasslands, South Dakota. Copyright © by Michael Forsberg/www.michaelforsberg.com

for the high-arctic tundras of far-northern Canada, still others to the Yukon-Kuskokwim delta of Alaska, and some even to Siberian tundras still some three thousand miles away.

— *Great Wildlife of the Great Plains*

Prairie Smoke

Years seem far too short for naturalists, and single seasons are even briefer. Springs come and go so rapidly that summer-blooming prairie roses seem to appear even before the blossoms of pasque flowers and purple avens have been transformed into wispy filaments of prairie smoke. Yet, for a few weeks each spring and fall the Great Plains are visited from the air by uncountable millions of transients. Many move silently at night, with the only clear evidence of their passing the broken bodies of small nocturnal migrant birds lying at the bases of tall buildings. Perhaps, while watching the pin-pricks of light from distant stars, they fail to see those colossal objects in front of them. Others we hear but don't see, as in the choruses of migrating waterfowl flying high above the reflected lights of our cities, intent on reaching some destination beyond our ken. Many are so large, or move in such numbers that we cannot overlook them.



Michael Forsberg. *HANG TIME*. Sandhill Cranes. Central Platte River Valley, Nebraska. Copyright © by Michael Forsberg/www.michaelforsberg.com

We come to measure our springs and falls by their regular appearance. These comings and goings are often the natural guideposts of our lives, as in "The spring we saw the whooping cranes" or "The winter of the snowy owls." Such events seem to provide far more satisfying memory-points than, for example, "The year I turned 40."

— *Great Wildlife of the Great Plains*

Imagined Views

The tallgrass prairie is one of the most romantic concepts of the American West. The imagined view of endless bison herds plodding through grass so tall That they half obscured them from sight is a powerful image, And one that today must remain more in the realm of fancy than of fact.

Quite probably most bison occurred on prairies of shorter stature, And the taller grasses that were present were likely soon clipped by the hungry migrants, But at least the vision is a most attractive one.

One image that can still be realized is the sight of tallgrass prairie
In full bloom from June through September,
When dozens of prairie forbs vie for the attention of bees, butterflies and moths.
— *The Nature of Nebraska*

Longevity, Fidelity, and Happiness

One should not have to argue for the protection and conservation efforts
That are being made on behalf of whooping cranes by federal, state and private
agencies;
The birds are at once the most spectacular of Nebraska's avifauna.

Cranes have an ancestral genealogy that is nearly as old as the Rocky
Mountains,
Their ancestors probably having flown over what is now Nebraska
While most of it was still a soggy marsh or an inland sea.

The oriental cultures consider cranes symbolic of longevity, fidelity, and
happiness.
We westerners should be grateful, and consider ourselves very lucky to host
them,
Even if only for brief periods, and in still dangerously small numbers,
Each spring and fall.
— *The Nature of Nebraska*

The Voice of the River

Migrating cranes still gather during spring in almost uncountable numbers
To rest and sleep beside the peaceful sandbars of the Platte.
Through the night the birds converse with the river,
Speaking in tongues that are both archaic and seemingly wise,
And the river patiently listens.
The voice of the river is even softer and possibly even older than that of the
birds,
And we would do well to try to hear and understand its plaintive message
While it is still able to speak.
— *The Nature of Nebraska*

Faith, Hope, and Love

All night long some cranes in every flock remain awake and stand watch
While others sleep with their bills tucked under their wings,

The latter presumably secure in the knowledge
That some of their group are always alert and watching for danger.
These unspoken promises, both daily and annual,
That the cranes keep with one another and with the river
Remind us of our individual promises and personal obligations to ourselves,
Our kin, and our land.

Holding the hand of a small grandchild, as a flock of cranes passes overhead,
And telling her that if she is very lucky
She might also one day show these same sights to her own grandchild
Are a powerful lesson in faith, hope, and love.
And beauty, touched by love, is somehow transformed into magic.
— *Earth, Water and Sky*

Promises Fulfilled

This March, like unnumbered Marches before it, the cranes have again
returned to the Platte Valley. Their annual predictable appearance is like watch-
ing a favorite spring flower unfolding, a piece of music developing, a promise
being fulfilled. That promise is being paid annually by the experienced migrant
cranes to all the generations of cranes that have stopped in the Platte Valley in
eons past. The present generation must instill among the less experienced birds
a firm memory of the Platte, the locations of its wet meadows, its abundant
grainfields, and a collective memory of its gentle evenings, when the river's cool
waters lap at the feet of the cranes as they stand all night in shallow waters
around the edges of the Platte's innumerable sandbars and islands.
— *Earth, Water and Sky*

Our Greatest Treasures

All wonderful and rare things in this world carry a significant price tag;
otherwise they would be neither rare nor so highly valued. The price tag on our
cranes is simply this: we must be willing to protect from destruction the wonder-
ful river that crosses Nebraska like a beautiful quicksilver necklace, the Platte
River. Beyond its rich historic value, the Platte is easily the most valuable and
most threatened of our surface waters. It is a river that millions of bison once
drank from, and one along which tens of thousands of immigrants once passed
on their way to building a complete America. Wading in that graceful river is like
wading into history; it is a river that offers many quiet gifts to us. Yet these are
also rich gifts that we must be willing to protect, cherish, and finally pass on to
our children as if they were our collective family's greatest treasures, which in
fact they are.
— *Earth, Water and Sky*

The Meaning of Religion

The word “religion” comes from the Latin word *religio*, meaning a bond between humans and the gods, and in common with enduring orchestral music, cranes provide that connection perfectly. Often appearing miraculously from incredible heights like celestial seraphims, and sometimes similarly ascending into the sky until they are lost to human view, our sandhill cranes are every bit as wondrous as the angels painted on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, and one does not have to travel to Italy to appreciate them.

— *Earth, Water and Sky*

The Stuff of Magic

Cranes are the stuff of magic, whose voices penetrate the atmosphere of the world’s wilderness areas, from arctic tundra to the South African veldt, and whose footprints have been left on the wetlands of the world for the past 60 million years or more. They have served as models for human tribal dances in places as remote as the Aegean, Australia, and Siberia. Whistles made from their wing bones have given courage to Crow and Cheyenne warriors of the North American Great Plains, who ritually blew on them as they rode into battle. These birds’ wariness, gregariousness, and regularity of migratory movements have stirred the hearts of people as far back as medieval times and probably long before, and their sagacity and complex social behavior have provided the basis for folklore and myths on several continents. Their large size and human-like appearance have perhaps been a major reason why we have so often been in awe of cranes, and why we have tended to bestow so many human attributes upon them.

— *Crane Music*

A River, a Season, and a Bird

There is a river in the heart of North America
That annually gathers together the watery largess of melting Rocky Mountain
snowfields and glaciers
And spills wildly down the eastern slopes of Colorado and Wyoming.
Reaching the plains, it quickly loses its momentum and begins to spread out
And flow slowly across Nebraska from west to east.
As it does so, it cuts a sinuous tracery through the native prairies
That has been followed for millennia by both men and animals.
The river is the Platte.

There is a season in the heart of North America
That is an unpredictable day-to-day battle between bitter winds carrying dense
curtains of snow

Out of Canada and the high plains, turning the prairies into ice sculptures,
And contrasting southern breezes that equally rapidly thaw out the native tall
grasses
And caress them gently.
The season is sweetened each dawn by the compelling music of western
meadowlarks,
Northern cardinals, and greater prairie-chickens,
And the sky is neatly punctuated throughout the day with skeins of migrating
waterfowl.
The season is spring.

There is a bird in the heart of North America
That is perhaps even older than the river,
And far more wary than the waterfowl or prairie-chickens.
It is as gray as the clouds of winter, as softly beautiful and graceful as the flower
heads
Of Indian grass and big bluestem,
And its penetrating bugle-like notes are as distinctive and memorable as the
barking of a coyote
Or the song of a western meadowlark.
The bird is the sandhill crane.

There is a magical time that occurs each year in the heart of North America,
When the river and the season and the bird all come into brief conjunction.

— *Crane Music*

The Geese Endure

In short, the sight of a migrating goose flock represents far more than a simple measure of the passing seasons; it is an unwritten testimony to dogged persistence in spite of adversity, to an inherited trust in the species’ long-term design for survival in the face of individual starvation and violent death. It provides a revealing insight into the workings of natural selection in a harsh and intolerant environment; the genetic blueprint for each new generation is predicated on the reproductive successes and failures of the last. It is an example that should lift the human spirit; despite individual disasters, the geese endure. Each spring they push relentlessly northward to rendezvous with fate on a distant arctic shoreline; each fall they return with the future of their species invested in a new generation of offspring. We can ask for no greater symbol of determination despite appalling hardships than is provided by waterfowl; we should be content with no less than a maximum commitment to their continued existence.

— *Waterfowl of North America*

Different Voices

We cannot expect to learn directly from or communicate with waterfowl;
They speak separate languages, hear different voices, know other sensory
worlds.

They transcend our own perceptions,
Make mockery of our national boundaries,
Ignore our flyway concepts.

They have their own innate maps, calendars, and compasses,
Each older and more remarkable than our own.

We can only delight in their flying skills,
Marvel at their regular and precise movements across our continent,
Take example from their persistence in the face of repeated disaster.
They are a microcosm of nature,
Of violent death and abundant rebirth,
Of untrammelled beauty and instinctive grace.

We should be content to ask no more of them than that they simply exist,
And we can hope for no more than that our children might know and enjoy them
as we do.

— *Waterfowl of North America*

Repeated Circles

Driving from Lincoln to the Platte Valley is like driving backward in time. One begins by passing over rolling hills of glacial till, sprinkled with rounded and ice-scarred boulders that were dropped randomly across the landscape as the last glacier retreated about 11,000 years ago. Within 50 miles the land is flatter, and the wind-carried loess soil underneath the grassy mantle dates back at least a half-million years. Great flocks of blackbirds move like dust clouds through the sky, sometimes briefly stopping to decorate a leaf-bare tree, then moving on like some restless spirit searching endlessly for a suitable final resting place. The first meadowlarks are starting to break into song from fenceposts along low meadows, and northern harriers sweep low over these same meadows. The meadowlarks singing here are all westerns, the easterns being seemingly unable or unwilling to leave their familiar patches of remnant tall-grass prairie to the east. Horned larks scatter like wind-blown leaves from the edges of dusty roads, and a vesper sparrow peers warily from the shelter of a wild plum in the ditch. Migrating Swainson's hawks soar lazily above, their wingtips delicately seeking out the faint updrafts coming from the sun-warmed earth, their circling paths reminding one that all of life consists of repeated circles, and that the

earth's orbit has gone full circle one more time since their return the previous spring.

— *Prairie Birds*

Sandhills Roads

Most roads in the Sandhills lead nowhere.
And that is one of their primary attractions.

They tend to become more and more indecisive the farther one goes
And finally disappear in sandy confusion, often at a fence or rancher's gate.

Thus, traveling on unfamiliar Sandhills roads is always a kind of adventure
That frequently has an unknowable ending.

— *This Fragile Land*

Sandhills Shadows

Probably the best treat of all in the Sandhills comes shortly before sundown.
Then the shadows of the dunes play carelessly over their still-lighted slopes,

Creating endless yin-yang patterns to remind the viewer
That light without darkness is incomplete,

Just as life and death are inextricably locked companions
In the weft and warp of nature's rich tapestry.

— *This Fragile Land*

Burrowing Owl

Probably no single grassland bird species is as fascinating to observe for hours on end than is the burrowing owl. It is an owl that doesn't seem to accept the fact that owls should sleep during the day and hunt at night. Instead it sits interminably on fenceposts or large boulders, carefully surveying its daytime surroundings with all the solemnity of a spindly-legged Bible-belt preacher on his pulpit, constantly scanning his flock to make certain they are all paying proper attention. Also like many such self-righteous preachers, it typically produces a large, unmanageable brood of youngsters in progressive stair-step sizes, who seem too prone to leave the confines of their burrow and wander away at the earliest opportunity, thereby often encountering trouble enough on their own.

— *Prairie Birds*

Swift Fox

What the swift fox lacks in size it makes up for in speed and agility. Perhaps it originally hung out around the kills of prairie wolves in the manner of present-day African jackals, hoping to find a few uneaten scraps of gristle and muscle, but always ready to dart away at a moment's notice. It probably has long been a somewhat peripheral member of the high plains predator community, and after a century or so of persecution and loss of habitat now it too has become less gristle than ghost, more memory than muscle.

— *Great Wildlife of the Great Plains*

Upland Sandpiper

Few sights are more charming than watching an upland sandpiper alight, ballet-like, on a fencepost, always briefly lifting its wings to the vertical as if it were congratulating itself on its dexterity, before tucking them gracefully into its flank feathers.

— *The Nature of Nebraska*

Prairie-Chicken Leks

We have far too few sacred natural sites in the eastern Great Plains;
Most of the holy sites of the Native Americans that once ruled the plains
Have since been cleared and “developed,” or their exact locations have been
long forgotten.

But we must not forget the locations of prairie-chicken leks;
They whisper to us of secret places where grama-grasses and bluestems grow
thick on the ground,
And where flint arrowheads are likely to lie buried beneath the thatch and loess.

They tell us of meadowlark and dickcissel song-perches,
And of traditional coyote hunting grounds.

They are as much a connection to our past as are the ruts left in the soil by
Conestoga wagons,
Or the preserved costumes of Native American cultures carefully stored in
museums.

— *Grassland Grouse and Their Conservation*

The Vital Essence of Life

Prairie-chickens are the vital essence of life itself,
Clinging to their brief moments in the sun with all the energies they can muster.
They risk attack by early-rising hawks and late-flying owls,
Simply to have a chance to reproduce before they are all too quickly cut down
By predators, disease or a hunter's gun.

The feathers that they wear and that are sometimes strewn over the ground
When a predator has been successful are the camouflage colors of dead grass,
And their soft hypnotic voices are exciting yet soothing,
Like the mantras emanating from a Hindu temple.
They comprise a New World symphony all by themselves,
A harmony of sound, color and movement.

— *Grassland Grouse and Their Conservation*

MEDITATING: MIGRATIONS OF THE SPIRIT

A Place Called Nebraska

There is a place in America where East and West merge together
As smoothly as one river flows into another.
There is a river in America that gave sustenance to perhaps a hundred thousand
migrants,
Who trudged westward in the mid-19th century along the Mormon and Oregon
trails.
That river is called the Platte.

There is a vast region of sandy grasslands in America
That represents the largest area of dunes,
And the grandest and least disturbed region of tallgrass prairies
That is found in all of the Western Hemisphere.
That region is called the Sandhills.

There is an underground reservoir in America
That at its maximum may be close to 1,000 feet deep,
And provides the largest known source of unpolluted water to be found
anywhere.
That reservoir is called the Ogallala aquifer.

There is a state in America that offers unhindered vistas of the West,
Stores vast fossil deposits that shed light on our collective past,
And boasts an enlightened citizenry that has built an enviable human history
And looks confidently toward the future.
Our state is called Nebraska.

— *The Nature of Nebraska*

Our Own Nirvana

There are thus still places in Nebraska where one can lie back on a fragrant bed
Of last-year's bluestem in early April,
With the half-intoxicating odor of freshly germinating grass invading one's nose,
And the shrill but majestic music of cranes almost constantly overhead,
With occasional harmonies added by arctic-bound if nearly invisible geese.
There is then a true sense of belonging to and being a part of the land,
And one can only give an unspoken prayer that such treasures will still be there
For those of the next generation to savor and love.
At such times one will realize that,
Although there may be places with higher mountains than Nebraska,
With magnificent rock-bound coastlines, or with misty cloud forests,
It really doesn't matter.

This is our spiritual home, our own self-chosen Nirvana, our prairie-born
paradise,
The natural surviving legacy of long-forgotten winds, immense amounts of water,
Now-vanished glacial ice, and unfathomable eons of time.
It has been freely bestowed upon us, either to keep or to destroy.
May we choose to keep it.

— *The Nature of Nebraska*

It Is Called the Nebraska Sandhills

Imagine a place in the Great Plains where the nights are so dark
That almost every star in the visible universe can be seen,
And the evenings are so quiet
That coyotes can be heard yipping from miles away.

Visualize a land where the nearest grocery store or filling station may be 50
miles or more distant,
And where the sight of a billboard is sufficiently rare that one actually notices
and reads it.

Think of a locality where the presence of old, discarded cowboy boots stuck
upside-down
On a fencepost may be the only sign of human influence,

And where a line shown as a road on a state highway map may represent
nothing more
Than two narrow tracks in bare sand that disappear over the far hills
Without so much as the slightest hint that anything or anyone might exist at the
other end.

It is not a land for the faint-hearted, for those in a hurry to be somewhere else,
Or those unwilling to feel totally alone and self-reliant.
It is a land, however, of gracefully bending horizons,
Of waving grass and shifting late afternoon shadows,
Of stunning sunsets, and of inner peace.
It is called the Nebraska Sandhills.

— *Great Wildlife of the Great Plains*

The Heart and Spirit of Nebraska

I finally began to realize that the true heart and spirit of Nebraska is not to be
found
In our eastern cities, our vastly overrated athletic programs,
Or even in the historic and now dying Platte River that whispers sad dirges to
times past
As it glides eastward to meet an equally altered and degraded river.

Rather, the state's pioneer spirit persists in the quiet recesses of our Sandhills,
Particularly in the fortitude of the people who once homesteaded them
And whose descendants sometimes still live there.

— *This Fragile Land*

Some Other Eden

Skeins of snow geese can still etch a March Nebraska sky from dawn to dusk,
Prairie-chickens still annually greet the spring sunrises with their ancestral
rituals,
And the spine-tingling cries of sandhill cranes coming to roost on the Platte
Still bring with them the distant echoes of thundering bison, trumpeting
mammoths,
And even of times before recorded time.

We can still totally lose ourselves in their grace and beauty,
Imagining that we have discovered some other Eden,
And hopefully resolve to act in such a way
That these birds might still be able to cast their marvelous spells
Just as strongly on our descendants a century hence as they do today.
— “A Century of Ornithology in Nebraska”

On the Shoulders of Giants

In 1676 Isaac Newton wrote a letter to Robert Hooke to the effect that
If he had seen further, it was by standing on the shoulders of giants.

When one stands on the summit of Scotts Bluff, or indeed any promontory,
One should not only look to the farthest horizon, but also look below,
For he or she is standing on the shoulders of unimaginable numbers
Of biological generations that may lie unknown and forever embedded below,
And on incalculable layers of dust and sand that are ultimately as old as the
earth itself.

It should be a humbling experience, and yet also an exalting one,
To be able thus to interpret the land and its life,
Of which we are but a tiny and very temporary part.
— *The Nature of Nebraska*

Straight and Undulating Lines

It is a curious fact of human nature that undulating lines are more interesting,
And jagged lines more visually exciting, than straight lines.

That simple truism is perhaps why there are far more books that have been
published
On the beauty of deserts and especially of mountain ranges,
Than have ever been written on the plants, animals and ecology of the plains
and prairies.

Unless one has been born and raised on the prairies, a painting by Mark Rothko,
Showing a broad horizontal red streak boldly crossing an otherwise unicolored
and dark background,
Does not immediately strike the average viewer as representing a magnificent
prairie sunset.

— *Prairie Birds*

Places That Stir the Heart

Someone once wrote, and it could only have been Aldo Leopold, that in its
biomass a ruffed grouse makes up only a minuscule part of the forest, but to
remove it is to remove much of the life from the forest. Similarly, a horned lark or
Sprague’s pipit represents an almost immeasurably tiny part of the prairie
ecosystem, but a prairie without the song of a horned lark or a Sprague’s pipit
overhead is no prairie at all. And a place with no prairies at all is not a place that
will stir the heart.

— *Prairie Birds*

Eos

Each spring, the sun swings slowly northward until it reaches the vernal
equinox in late March. Then for a singular day it rises above the horizon at
exactly due East, and also sets precisely twelve hours later at due West. At such
times I am reminded of Eos, Greek goddess of the dawn, her pre-sunrise
presence projected above the eastern horizon as pinkish fingers of radiant light.
We have a collective cultural memory of her to thank for the Old English word
East, meaning the direction of sunrise, as well as the original pagan springtime
celebration of Easter. It is an auspicious time to be alive—a time above all to
watch birds—the word *auspicious* is similarly of pre-Christian origin (from the
Latin in this case), meaning to divine the future by watching the movements of
birds.

— *Prairie Birds*

The Great Plains

The Great Plains are thus a biological meeting place for northern, southern,
eastern and western elements, acquiring a kind of collective uniqueness simply
by virtue of their central position, thereby becoming a sort of biological melting
pot into which plants and animals have seeped from around all their edges. Like
America itself, the plains represent a kind of composite or self-assembled land,
whose strength lies in their diversity and whose remnants must be treasured and
protected, if only in fragmentary remnants and locations.

— *Great Wildlife of the Great Plains*

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